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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growth and development of the Arapaho immersion program and discusses language revitalization strategies and methods used on the Wind River Reservation (Wyoming). Following a community request for an Arapaho language and culture program in reservation public schools, a test class of kindergarten students received an hour of Arapaho instruction daily for 18 weeks. After 12 weeks, 80 percent of students had mastered 162 words and phrases. These favorable results plus information from Hawaiian immersion programs led to implementation of a half-day immersion kindergarten class in September 1993. A belief in the need to increase students' language contact hours led to a preschool immersion class; a summer program; and finally, a 6-hour-a-day school immersion program. Although children in the expanded school program greatly increased their mastery of Arapaho, they did not come close to fluency because they lacked the ability to independently use and manipulate new speech forms. In 1996, a trainer from the Hawaiian language immersion system was hired to guide and train staff in proven immersion techniques, and a second immersion class was begun on another part of the reservation. Both classes made astonishing progress, but fluency was again elusive. To achieve fluency, children must be systematically exposed to a full array of speech forms by a well-trained teacher with a clear understanding of language acquisition. Thus, effective teacher training remains a critical issue for language immersion programs. Implications of the enormous success of Maori immersion efforts are discussed. (SV)

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Teaching Indigenous Languages

Going Beyond Words: The Arapaho Immersion Program

Steve Greymorning

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RC 021331

Going Beyond Words: The Arapaho Immersion Program

Steve Greymorning

Throughout Indian Country efforts to teach Native languages to non-Native speakers usually results with non-Native speakers only acquiring a limited number of words and phrases. Thus the teaching of Native languages has had little or no effect upon reversing the steady decline of the number of speakers of indigenous languages. A problem that has consistently plagued Native efforts to teach Native languages to successive generations is not having well defined examples and a clear understanding of methods that can actually yield successful speakers. To provide one such example, this paper examines the growth and development of the Arapaho language immersion program and discusses language revitalization strategies and methods and levels of success that the Arapaho Language Lodge staff have achieved as they have steadily worked to establish a new generation of Arapaho speaking children on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

From the late eighteen hundreds to the middle nineteen hundreds, the Arapaho people, along with most other Indigenous peoples of North America, were led to believe that if they and their children were to become "valued" American citizens they would have to abandon their Arapaho language. During this period, boarding school personnel, backed by government support, aggressively worked toward replacing the languages of Indigenous peoples with English as the standard language of communication. The result of this effort has lead to the steady decline of Indigenous languages throughout North America.

As Indigenous people prepare themselves for the challenges of the twenty-first century, many will face the problems of language loss as their greatest challenge. Typically, the pattern of language loss usually begins with young adults becoming bilingual, speaking both their Indigenous language and the language of the majority population. Their children then become monolingual, speaking only the language of the majority population, until eventually only the older people are left as speakers of an Indigenous language that has become a minority language. Left unattended or neglected, the process of language loss continues until the last indigenous speaker dies.

Long before an indigenous language actually slips into extinction, it slowly decays through the loss of its grammatical complexities, the loss of native words forgotten by native speakers, and the loss through the incorporation of foreign vocabulary and foreign grammatical features into the indigenous language. As language losses accumulate, they also bring about dramatic cultural losses.

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Assessing the problem and developing a strategy

The future of any language lies in its ability to be passed on to successive generations. It is well documented that early childhood is the ideal time for language learning; it is the time when language acquisition occurs in all cultures. In recognizing this, Elder Arapaho community members expressed concern over the fact that children had not learned to speak Arapaho for the past 40 years. Out of this concern, Elders articulated their desire for children to become speakers of Arapaho. Faced with the lack of success schools were having in teaching Arapaho, the Northern Plains Educational Foundation, a community group, asked me to direct a language and culture program within the reservation public schools.

I began work in January 1993, and within the first week of my position I realized that in spite of Arapaho having been taught in the schools since 1978, students only received an average of 45 hours of language instruction per academic year; about the same amount of time an administrator devotes to his job tasks in one week of work. This information made it that much more unsettling when administrators and teaching staff consistently questioned why students were not developing Arapaho speaking skills. I then realized the magnitude of our struggle to try and maintain our languages and cultures in the face of such deeply rooted colonialistic attitudes that still maintain, with the best of intentions, assimilation is the best course for "Indians." This and the following scenario is most likely similar on many reservations. District superintendents, school principals, administrators, and perhaps 98% of teaching staff, from kindergarten to grade twelve, are neither natives of the culture nor native to the reservations upon which they work and teach. My observations led me to realize that I would have to maneuver carefully.

Taking advantage of the newness of my position, I suggested setting up a kindergarten class to test what would be the impact of an hour-long language class, five days a week, over an eighteen week period. The school's principal acknowledged that this would be the first time anyone had attempted to accumulate statistical information on an Arapaho language class and endorsed the class. After eighteen months the results were dramatic.

Addressing the problem with an effective methodology

The instruction of the Arapaho language within the Wyoming School District was provided by six fluent Arapaho speakers. These Arapaho language instructors were hired on the basis of passing a review of Elder fluent speakers who made up the Arapaho language commission, and it was their responsibility to instruct the Arapaho language to students from kindergarten to the twelfth grade. While none of the language instructors had actually begun their jobs with any teacher training, the school system had provided them with numerous in-services on teaching methods throughout their employment within the school system. In spite of this, the methods that they learned were not well suited for the task of teaching Arapaho.

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In creating an hour-long Arapaho language kindergarten class, the strategy was to take five children from each of the three kindergarten classes to form a class that would receive an hour of language instruction each day. The progress of this test class was then compared to the other three kindergarten classes, which received 15 minutes per day of language instruction throughout the school term. The class was structure to accommodate 15 kindergarten children of varying interests and attention spans who were divided into three groups of five students, with each group assigned to a learning station. After 15 minutes at a learning station, each group rotated to a different station. After 45 minutes of working at the three different learning stations, all 15 students met as one group for the fourth 15 minute segment of the hour-long period. Each station covered a different aspect of language use. One station focused on word drills, a second focused on phrase drills, and the third focused on interactive conversations between the children and instructor. At each station the children were led by a different instructor. When the three groups combined into one group for the last 15 minute session, a fourth instructor came into the class and asked the children to respond to various commands and execute different tasks. The obvious strength of this approach was in exposing the children to four different speakers who each focused on different aspects of language use.

After twelve weeks had elapsed, 80% of the test class had mastered 162 words and phrases. This included a list of 32 phrases such as stand up, sit down, come here, are you hungry, yes I am hungry, what are you doing, I am jumping, what is your name, my name is…, write your name, are you thirsty, I am thirsty, pick it up, throw it away, put it down, come in, throw it (for both animate and inanimate objects), go and get it, give it to me. In addition to the 32 phrases, they could namê; 36 animals, 15 body parts, 12 different food items, eight different types of clothing, nine colors, count to 30, and the following 20 miscellaneous words; ball, plate, grandma, box, fork, grandpa, chair, spoon, mother, cup, tree, father, knife, rock, what, paper, river, hello, snow, and mountain. By the end of a school year the three control classes, in comparison, were assessed at having mastered a vocabulary of between 15 and 18 words.

Implementing immersion classes

I had already known that the best way to accomplish the long range goal of producing children who can fluently speak Arapaho was by placing them in a setting that paralleled the way fluent speakers acquired Arapaho, in other words by immersing them in the language. These thoughts were reinforced after I attended a language conference in May 1993 that showcased the immersion efforts of the Hawaiians. Through my observations at this conference I assessed that Hawaiian children were achieving an age appropriate level of fluency in Hawaiian after being exposed to from 600 to 700 language contact hours. The goal then became to implement an immersion class in Arapaho.

The results of the kindergarten test class were favorably received by the elementary school principal. On the basis of the documented results, a half day immersion kindergarten class was implemented at the school in September 1993.

The class was set up similar to how the hour-long kindergarten class had been set up, with children learning at different language stations that focused on different aspects of language use. Along with this initial effort, Arapaho language assessments were developed and implemented for children in kindergarten through fourth grade. The assessments charted what the students knew in Arapaho at the start of the school year and then again between the seventh and eighth week of each successive nine week quarter. Using each documented word/phrase count, a bar graph was created to illustrate each child's language level growth rate.

By the end of October I realized that the existing weakness in understanding language teaching methods, coupled with the severely limited amount of time allotted for Arapaho language instruction, would not allow for any significant change to occur in what could actually be taught and learned. This realization led to an Arapaho pilot language immersion class being implemented in January 1994 for preschool aged children within the Ethete community. One of the objectives of the preschool immersion project was to demonstrate how children could be guided toward achieving a speaking ability that would allow them to interact with instructors and each other in Arapaho. Underlying the implementation of the immersion class was the idea that if children could gain fluency before reaching elementary school then the task of language instructors would shift to focusing on maintaining fluency rather than trying to create fluency under almost impossible conditions.

The pilot immersion project ran for two hours a day, four days a week, from January to May 1994. During the course of this class children were exposed to 136 hours of Arapaho over a four month period. When comparing the number of language contact hours received in the pilot project to the number of language contact hours a child received in the school system, it was assessed that it would take a child three years of elementary school to attain the same amount of language contact hours. In both cases, however, the number fell far short of the 600 to 700 language contact hours projected as being needed for the onset of fluency to occur. As expected, when comparing the language learning that occurred between the kindergarten immersion class, which received 540 language contact hours, and the preschool immersion class, the kindergarten class demonstrated an Arapaho language vocabulary and comprehension level that greatly surpassed that of children in the preschool immersion class. In an attempt to address this, partial funding was acquiring from a private source to help with the operation of a summer immersion class.

The summer immersion class could not operate, however, without finding additional money. Parents of the children attending the immersion class decided that in order to make up the rest of the needed funds they would pay a tuition to keep their children in the immersion class during the summer. The summer project ran for five weeks, three hours a day, three days a week on a $500 budget. Each parent paid a $20 tuition fee, and the instructors agreed to work for five dollars an hour. When realizing that the unemployment rate on the reservation can exceed 80% during the summer months, the tuition paid by

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the parents was probably one of the most significant acts of support ever given to a reservation program.

Possibly impressed by the demonstration of parental support for the summer class, the Wyoming Council for the Humanities agreed to fund the project from September 1994 to mid-May 1995. The 1994/1995 project year ran three hours a day, Monday to Friday. It was calculated that the total number of language contact hours during this time period would amount to approximately 456 hours. In spite of this increase, I was still very aware that if we hoped to develop fluent speakers from among the children, the project needed to operate at least six hours a day. Satisfaction was nevertheless drawn from knowing that the increase in time reflected movement in the right direction.

Troubleshooting problems and moving to a full-day immersion class

One of the problems that seems to face many of our language instructors is a belief that in order for students to learn an Indian language they have to always be given English meanings for what is being said to them in "Indian." This stood as a consistent problem with the language instructors in the Arapaho immersion class. In spite of numerous explanations and signs announcing "No English Spoken," each of the times I visited the class it was common for me to hear instructors speaking English. This made me speculate that although the language instructors knew the project's goals, they still lacked a firm commitment to the methods needed to instruct within an immersion setting. I constantly tried to convince the instructors of the absolute necessity of not speaking English to the children. From their perspective, however, because they observed more Arapaho spoken by children in the immersion class than they had ever heard from any other child, they remained quietly convinced that it was due to their mixing English and Arapaho when they spoke to the children.

In an attempt to get the children exposed to more Arapaho, the language class was expanded to six hours a day, made possible by grants from the Wyoming Council for the Humanities and Lannan Foundation. In addition, a director was hired to locally oversee the project. The primary goals of the expanded class were for the instructors to use no English with the children and to get the children to achieve a higher level of language competency.

After the class started, I was not able to observe how things were going until mid-December 1995. When I walked into the class I was overwhelmed by the children's speaking ability in Arapaho. In a matter of three and a half months the children had mastered enough Arapaho that they could collectively interact with the language instructors for ten to 15 minutes without speaking English. I viewed the class with renewed enthusiasm and believed that by the end of the school year children would surely be demonstrating speaking skills that bordered upon fluency.

By the time April 1996 arrived it was clear that the children were not even close to fluency. After such demonstrated promise in December, the question that remained was: Why weren't the children on the threshold of fluency? While the children possessed very impressive speaking abilities in Arapaho, abilities

that enabled them to pray and respond to a wide range of questions, tasks, and commands, they still did not possess an ability to speak Arapaho outside of what was directly taught to them within the classroom. The task became to assess the problem and make corrections.

What the children lacked was the ability to independently use and manipulate new speech forms. Simply put, they lacked the ability to use Arapaho to speak what was on their minds. They could only speak phrases that they had been directly taught. Again it became clear that what was missing was an understanding, implementation, and effective use of a methodology that could guide language learners to true language acquisition and fluency. To address the problem I decided to bring in an immersion technician from the Hawaiian Punana Leo language immersion system for the following school year. The designated task of the "immersion trainer" was to observe the classroom on a daily basis and then provide the staff with guidance and training in proven immersion techniques. The new problem this created was finding additional funding support so the immersion trainer could be brought in.

Expanding and strengthening the program

In January 1996, I was called by the Arapaho Tribal Council about the prospect of my writing and Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grant. I thus set myself to writing a grant proposal to start up a second language immersion class on another part of the reservation about seventeen miles away in the Arapaho district. In addition to this grant proposal went the task of writing grants for the continuation of the already existing immersion class in the Ethete district and finding money to pay for the immersion trainer. Much to our relief all grants were awarded and additional money was found to bring in the trainer.

While it turned out to be a benefit to have two immersion classes operating, it initially was difficult staffing them. Fortunately, an interview process had been worked out in 1994 when the first half-day immersion class were implemented. In an effort to identify the strongest staff for the language positions, people being interviewed were asked to teach a shortened version of an immersion class day. In their videotaped 40 minute demonstration lesson they were told to speak only Arapaho. A plus was given for following the outlined schedule of tasks or creatively leading the children through other tasks in Arapaho and a minus was given each time they spoke English. The pluses and minuses were added up, and the individuals with the strongest scores were offered positions. In spite of very promising demonstrations, over the years the need remained for proper training in the techniques of immersion. It was fortunate however that from out of those hired an individual emerged who had promising natural teaching skills and who had also filled in as a substitute from time to time for the Ethete immersion class. What resulted for the second class was a very dynamic instructor who was familiar with the philosophy and approach of the immersion effort who was joined by two other strong instructors.

In the initial months of the immersion classes the trainer worked on laying down a strong understanding of language instructional techniques that could

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help move children attending the language classes toward fluency. His observations revealed that the children in the newest class in the Arapaho district were making rapid advancements, and his comments led me to videotape the class. I had been impressed with the progress of the Ethete class in December 1995, but I was left speechless in November 1996 by the amount of Arapaho I heard from the children attending the immersion class in the Arapaho district.

The second class in the Arapaho district began operation on October 6. I arrived four weeks later on November 7 to observe the class and during my three hours of observations I assessed that the children had spent about 90% of their time speaking Arapaho. In addition to this I was greatly impressed by the fact that on a number of occasions I heard different children speaking Arapaho to one another without the assistance or intervention of the language instructors. An example of this was that on one occasion when a child had been hurt, she ran crying to the instructor speaking Arapaho instead of English! On another occasion after a child had been hit by a large playground ball, he jumped up and said to the child who had thrown the ball "You're bad!" in Arapaho. Each time I listened to the tape I became aware that children in the background, who were not the focus of the camera's lens, were using Arapaho phrases on their own and among themselves without the prompting of the instructors.

The strong start of the class led me to hope that the elusive goal of fluency among the immersion class children would be realized. Unfortunately, as in previous years, while the children of both immersion classes were speaking far more Arapaho than children had mastered the year before, they still were only using the language within the confines of what they had been exposed to, and that, when compared to the fullness of the entire Arapaho language, was very limited. Again, the key that seemed to be lacking was an understanding of that facet of language acquisition that allows children to begin to independently use and manipulate language on their own. Thus, it is not enough simply to teach children language phrases. If the objective is for children to acquire our native languages, then children must be exposed to every facet of whatever native language they are meant to acquire. This means that by learning several hundred phrases we cannot expect that language learners will somehow magically acquire an ability to speak in a passive voice or to form questions in a negative, future or past tense if they have never been exposed to such speech forms.

The only way to get children to speak in such a full manner is to systematically expose them to speech forms in a way that requires them to not only hear the usage of such forms but also requires them to verbally respond to such speech acts by using a full array of speech forms. Again, this does not mean that they will some how magically begin to demonstrate a fluent use of speech forms if they are not systematically led to such forms of language use. The realization of this means that one of the tasks of the instructor is to work with an absolutely thorough understanding of their own language, with all of its nuances and complexities, so that the language instructor can very systematically bring these speech forms out when speaking to developing speakers and getting developing speakers to speak back to them. An example of this can be

illustrated with the following. When giving one speech form, such as "Are you hungry?" Children are usually taught to respond by saying "I am hungry." But how many of our language instructors go beyond this so that developing speakers learn how to express such things as "I am hungry now but I am not going to be hungry later" or "I am not hungry but I should eat" or "Yesterday when I was asked if I was hungry I wasn't really hungry but after my teacher asked me I got hungry so I ate" or "When teacher asked my friend if he was hungry it made me hungry" or "I am not going to eat because I am not hungry" or "Yesterday I wasn't hungry but I still ate, but tomorrow if I am not hungry I am not going to eat" or "Tomorrow I am going to eat even if I am not hungry because before when I didn't eat I quickly got hungry." Thus, by having an absolute thorough understanding of ones own language, a single phrase like: Are you hungry? can generate an almost endless array of speech forms that include expressions in first, second, or third person singular and plural, conditional ("They might help us if we feed them first"), and negative forms of statements such as "Can't we go swimming" or "Why can't we go swimming?" or "I would have gone swimming but because one of them said I couldn't swim very fast and my girl friend's eyes were crossed I did not want to go with them."

For those who would wonder why anyone should have to worry about whether someone should actually be able to say such things, the response is that it is because of the fact that a speaker possesses the ability to go beyond saying isolated words and phrases to say such things, and much much more, that they are recognized as fluent. Furthermore, if we cannot pass on to our developing speakers this ability our languages will be lost. Therefore, if we are to maintain any hope of keeping our languages viable and alive, it remains absolutely essential that we shift our focus from teaching our children words and phrases to passing on to them the ability to think and effectively communicate in our native languages.

The next step

By May 1997 the immersion program had still not produced a child with any level of fluency in the Arapaho language. After assessing the class and other unsuccessful language efforts, it appears that having a clear understanding of how language is acquired is a crucial link in getting children to actually acquire the languages being taught. Thus, the need for effective teacher training still remains a key issue in achieving a successful level of operation for language immersion classes. In observing successful indigenous language immersion efforts, one of the factors that has consistently contributed to their success is that they are being primarily staffed by second language learners. This success is most likely the result of these individuals having effectively internalized the language learning process based on their own experience and success, a factor that seems to elude most speakers who have acquired their languages as first language speakers.

At the time of this writing, I am in New Zealand to examine the enormous success of Maori immersion efforts. In a revitalization effort that states "lan-

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guage from the breast," Maori people now have numerous examples of children who are speaking Maori as their first language. Much to their credit, these achievements have not fostered complacency among them. In the course of their language revitalization work they have developed primary schools, secondary schools, and even universities of their own in which Maori is the primary language of communication. While here I have also learned of their intensive adult language immersion work, and it is here where I believe Indigenous North Americans might receive the most benefit.

As the Arapaho language immersion effort looks to move on to the next step, developing an arrangement with the Maori may be the natural thing to do. By offering very intensive week-long immersion classes at the end of each month, the Maori have been very successful in developing waves of adult second language learners. The idea is that since these classes are so effective, then by having an instructor attend a week-long class, with perhaps a second week-long follow-up class on actual methodology, our language instructors could internalize the methods that are enabling adults to become proficient language speakers as second language learners. The logic of such an approach would seem more favorable then trying to send our Elder speakers through a year or two of the standard university-level teacher training. I plan to attend one of these classes in October 1997 to assess the viability of using similar classes to train Arapaho language instructors.

The second approach stems from the Maori philosophy of language from the breast. This approach involves starting language classes for mothers and their 16 to 24 month old children. These immersion classes would focus on the language needs of the infants and their mothers in such a way as to develop the language skills of both. Thus in a relatively short period of time the emergence of the infant's language could serve as a motivational factor for the mothers to encourage them to develop their own language skills. By focusing on these two groups of language learners, two things could occur. One, we could hope to prepare a younger group of fluent speakers to carry on as the next generation of language teachers, and two, infants could emerge as first language speakers who could serve to aid in the continued effort to reestablish our native language as a viable and healthy language.

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